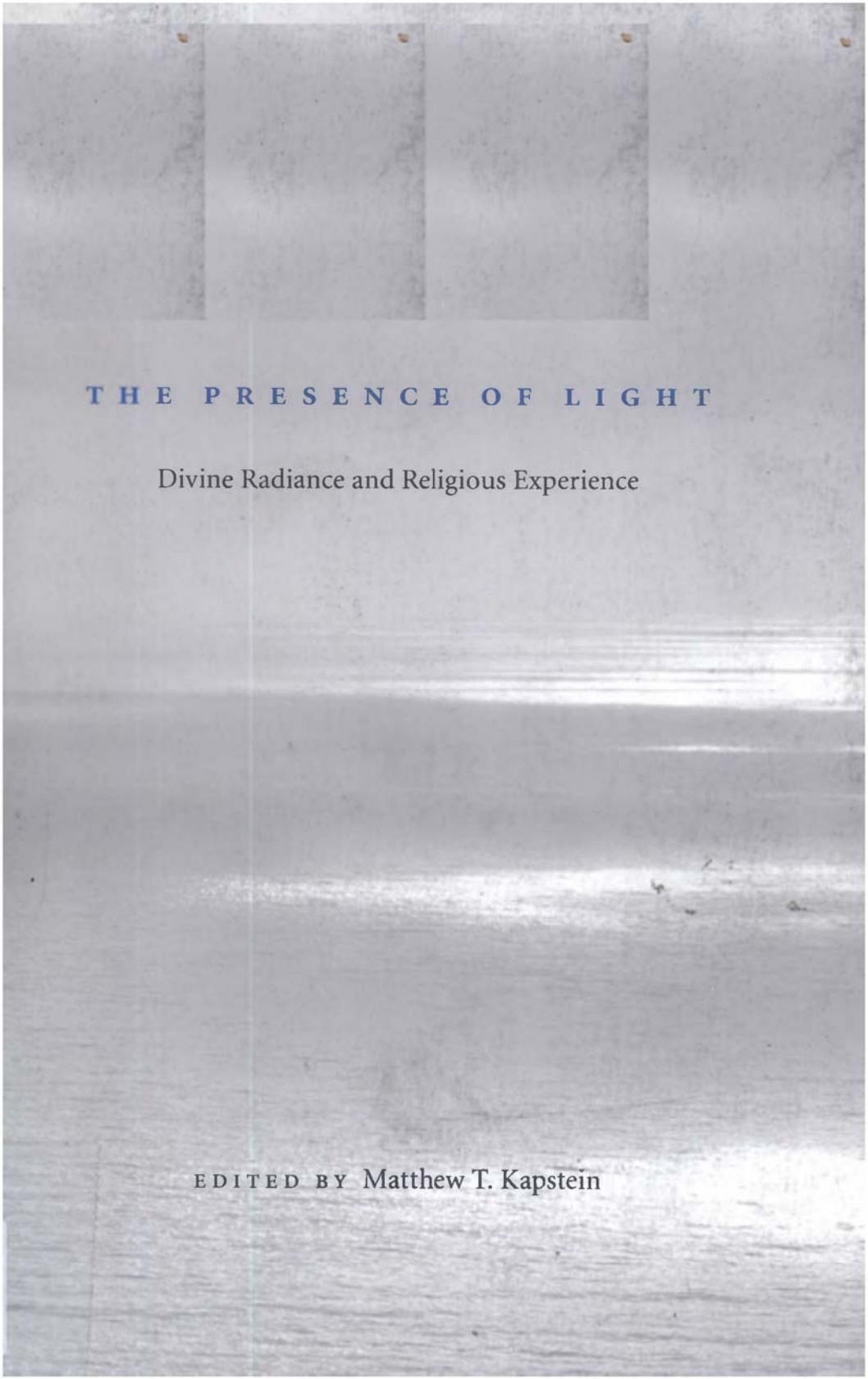

THE PRESENCE OF LIGHT
Divine Radiance and Religious Experience
EDITED BY Matthew T. Kapstein

"*The Presence of Light* is a significant contribution to the history of religions and the study of mysticism. This is a rich collection of essays and an exemplary model of comparative inquiry."

WILLIAM DARROW, WILLIAMS COLLEGE

There is perhaps no greater constant in religious experience than the presence of light. In spiritual traditions East and West, light is not only ubiquitous but, phenomenally and metaphorically, it assumes strikingly similar forms in altogether different historical and cultural settings. This study examines light in relation to religiously valued experience and its entailments for mystical theology, philosophy, politics, and religious art.

The essays in this volume make an important contribution to religious studies by proposing that it is misleading to conceive of religious experience in terms of an irreconcilable dichotomy between the interpretive models of perennialism and cultural construction. An esteemed group of contributors, representing the study of Asian and Western religious traditions from a range of disciplinary perspectives, suggests that attention to various forms of divine radiance shows that there is indeed a range of principles that, if not universal, are nevertheless very widely occurring and amenable to fruitful comparative inquiry. What results is a work of enormous scope, demonstrating compelling cross-connections that will be of value to scholars of comparative religions, mysticism, and the relationship between art and the sacred.

MATTHEW T. KAPSTEIN is the Numata Professor of Buddhist Studies in the Divinity School of the University of Chicago and directeur d'études at the École Pratique des Hautes Études, Paris. He is the author of *The Tibetan Assimilation of Buddhism: Conversion, Contestation, and Memory* and *Reason's Traces: Identity and Interpretation in Indian and Tibetan Buddhist Thought.*

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CHAPTER SIX

The Strange Death of Pema the Demon Tamer

Matthew T. Kapstein

[A]t Manikengo . . . we had been told the story of a very saintly man who had died there the previous year. We went to the house where he had lived, and met his son and his wife who recounted the miracle that had occurred at the old man's death.

In his lifetime he had erected a group of "*Mani* stones" on which he had carved a great number of *mantras* and *sutras* and he had also set up a *chöten* (*stupa*) among them.

In his youth he had been a servant with a wealthy family, but in middle age he left his employment to receive meditational instruction in a monastery. Though he had to work for his living by day, he spent most of his nights in contemplation only allowing himself two to three hours' sleep. His compassion was so great that he always helped every one in need, and opened his house at all times to pilgrims and the very poor. While carrying out his daily work he used to practise meditation in his own way, though his son who was a monk told him that he should carry out more formal spiritual exercises, but this he could not accept. Though he had hitherto always been in good health, three years before his death he fell ill and his family began to be very worried, yet he himself appeared to become increasingly happy. He composed and sang his own songs of praise instead of traditional Buddhist chants. As his illness became more and more serious, lamas and doctors were called in, with his son telling him that he must now remember all the teaching that he had received, at which he smiled, saying, "I have forgotten it all, and anyway there is nothing to remember; everything is illusion, yet I am confident that all is well." Just before his death the old man said "When I die you must not move my body for a week; this is all that I desire."

They wrapped his dead body in old clothes and called in lamas and monks to recite and chant. The body was carried into a small room, little bigger than a cupboard and it was noted that though the old man had been tall the body appeared to have become smaller; at the same time a rainbow was seen over the house. On the sixth day on looking into the room the family saw that it had grown still smaller. A funeral service was arranged for the morning of the eighth day and men came to take the body to the cemetery; when they undid the coverings there was nothing inside except nails and hair. The

villagers were astounded, for it would have been impossible for anyone to have come into the room, the door was always kept locked and the window of the little resting place was much too small.

The family reported the event to the authorities and also went to ask Chentze Rinpoche about the meaning of it. He told them that such a happening had been reported several times in the past and that the body of the saintly man had been absorbed into the Light. They showed me the nails and the hair and the small room where they had kept the body. We had heard of such things happening, but never at first hand, so we went round the village to ask for further information. Everyone had seen the rainbow and knew that the body had disappeared. This village was on the main route from China to Lhasa and the people told me that the previous year when the Chinese heard about it they were furious and said the story must not be talked about.[1]

Among the special doctrines of the Great Perfection (*rdzogs-chen*) tradition of meditation, an esoteric system shared by the Nyingmapa order of Tibetan Buddhism and the Bön religion, is the teaching that some adepts who achieve the highest realization attain a "rainbow body" (*'ja'-lus*) at death. When this takes place, the adept's physical remains dissolve into light and so make manifest the thoroughgoing transformation of the person that has been catalyzed by prior spiritual discipline. In the passage reproduced here, the late Chögyam Trungpa, Rinpoche, describes an occurrence that took place in eastern Tibet during the early 1950s.

It was not long after I first read his words that I began to consider the rainbow body as a significant question for Tibetan religious culture, and not just an anecdotal oddity emphasized, before Trungpa, primarily in Western occultist literature. My own teacher, Serlo Khenpo Sanggye Tenzin (1924–1990), had been among those who had visited the family described above, shortly after the old man's passing in 1952/53, and his account closely resembled Chögyam Trungpa's. I first discussed it with him in 1974, and soon afterward I also met the son mentioned above, the one who had recommended "more formal spiritual exercises" to his father and who then lived near Darjeeling. Under the impact of his father's dissolution at death, it seems that (as one might expect under the circumstances) his world had been quite overturned, and he had long ago abandoned a mainstream monastic vocation in favor of the more eccentric lifestyle of a yogin and adept of the Great Perfection system of yoga and meditation. Through these and other encounters, I became familiar with Tibetans who had some knowledge of traditions concerning the rainbow body and their views of the matter and so gained a dawning recognition of their complexity. In particular, I was intrigued by a short text by the famous adept and scholar Mipham (1846–1912), to which my teacher had introduced me. In it, Mipham

responds to the consternation expressed by a number of his associates concerning the recent death of a famous meditation master of the Nyingmapa (Rnying-ma-pa) order, Pema Düdül (Nyag-bla Padma-bdud-'dul, d. 1872),[2] Pema the Demon Tamer. Mipham's comments open as follows:

> In my own dwelling, on the eighteenth day of the month of Pūrvabhādra, during the wood boar year of the fifteen cycle [= 1875], some of the brethren who were staying with me strongly encouraged me with a request that they had made repeatedly in the past, saying, "We've conversed with some who are critical and wise, who say, 'Listen! It's a lie that this one called Pema Düdül has passed away in the rainbow body, the body of reality. In general, there can't be rainbow bodies in such bad times as these. And even if one attributes [the attainment of the rainbow body] to the specific path of the Great Perfection, it's said that the four visions [which characterize the highest realization of the Great Perfection] must be gradually perfected [before this can happen], and that, in the end, speech becomes no more than an echo, just repeating [what others say to the individual concerned]. But on the day preceding his death he was loquacious! Moreover, though one must abandon outer and inner activities in nine ways, he was maintaining a retinue and disciples!' For these and other similar reasons, nowadays there are disputants of our own and other [sects] who have come to be doubtful about this. So what's all this about? Please tell us something!"[3]

Mipham's text aroused my interest above all owing to the clarity with which it demonstrated that Tibetans themselves had sometimes expressed puzzlement and doubt about the rainbow body, and that it was thus seen by some as a problem, as much as for others it may have been a matter of faith. Mipham, in responding to his inquirers, did not so much attempt to prove that the event in question actually happened as he did to establish its plausibility. And this provides an appropriate agenda for our investigation, that is, to examine the framework of Tibetan Buddhist belief and thought in virtue of which the rainbow body is, for some at least, a matter of plausibility. Of course, in our present context it will not be sufficient just to repeat Mipham's response to his interlocutors,[4] who, despite their doubts, were participants in the Tibetan Buddhist belief system; what is required, certainly, is a broader reflection upon the category of "light" in Buddhist and Tibetan religious thought, particularly in its relation to death and to sanctity.

In attempting to consider the background in virtue of which some Tibetan Buddhists regarded the decease of persons in a rainbow body as a possible occurrence, we must distinguish carefully between physical plausibility and what we might term moral, or spiritual, plausibility. In the context of our own culture, for instance, in science fiction and philosophical puzzle cases, we readily admit in theory the physical possibility that persons may be reduced to light

and then even reconstituted, as anyone familiar with the phrase, "Beam me up, Scotty!" well knows. Still, we should be surprised should some future technology actually achieve transport by beaming. More to the point, however, is that, for our culture of the imagination, there is absolutely no moral dimension to this sort of reduction of persons to light: intergalactic mass murderers may be just as well beamed as Captain Kirk. For Tibetan religious culture, however, the attainment of the rainbow body was in most cases thought to signify an extreme degree of spiritual perfection, or at the least a quasi-divine status, and to plausibly occur only when such perfection was realized. It was, moreover, the precise relationship between the rainbow body and spiritual excellence that was often considered problematic. Thus, in the passage cited above, Mipham's inquirers do not express any doubt regarding Pema the Demon Tamer's reputation as a religious master; what they question is whether his particular mode of religious life was consonant with the extremity of ascetic and visionary perfection in virtue of which the rainbow body was thought to be a possible attainment; indeed, they question whether any religious life in these "bad times" could achieve that. Here is the description given in Pema Düdül's own biography, summarizing the account that was the source of their puzzlement:

In the water ape year, called *Aṅgira* [1872], on the new moon of the peaceful month of Vaiśākha, the venerable lama [Pema Düdül] set up a meditation tent and dwelt there. He instructed his disciples to come and had them all settle into meditation, the receptacle [of faith, i.e., the guru, visualized] upon the crowns of their heads. And he then recited [prayers] such as:

> In all lifetimes, inseparable from the genuine guru,
> May you enjoy the glory of the Dharma,
> And, perfecting the virtues of the stages and paths,
> May you attain to the level of [the primordial buddha] Vajradhara!

He then said, "Now, go back to your own places. After sewing shut my tent flap, no one is to come here for seven days."

The spiritual sons and disciples did what the lama had told them and returned to their own places feeling mentally ill at ease. At dawn on the seventh day, they performed prostrations before the meditation tent which was the lama's dwelling, and they opened it up. The lord's robes and meditation seat, his hair, and the nails of his fingers and toes were there on his bed, but the maṇḍala of his body had disappeared. At that, the spiritual sons and disciples lamented very much in sorrow, whereupon the sky was all filled by rainbow lights and such. At that time, some intelligent and supremely religious persons and some who were certainly his closest spiritual sons met him in contemplative experiences, visions, and dreams, in which he granted them his approval in speech, comforted them with the highest teachings, and so forth.[5]

Once again, however, we must underscore that our subject matter here in the first instance has little to do with particle physics.

INDIAN BUDDHIST DISCOURSES OF LIGHT AND THEIR TIBETAN LEGACY

Listen! The great resentment of the unholy toward the holy
Resembles weeds drifting atop pure water.
There are two reasons for it: jealousy's sting
And ignorance due to lack of learning or discernment.
If it be owing to the sting of envy,
As when our Lord [Buddha] was crudely disparaged
By extremists and by Devadatta,
Then that only [reflects] the magnificence of ultimate reality.
"When he approached the point of enlightenment
The earth came to quake six times,
Whereupon Māra grew discontent"—
It is just as is thus said.
If it be owing to sectarian partisanship,
So that one [sect's proponents] chastise others
On account of attainments they themselves do not possess,
That would be shameful beyond all shame!
In the varied Tantra collections of the new and ancient schools,
The dissolution of the coarse body
Into a body of light is established;
And many scholars and saints of India and Tibet
have been thus transformed.
To say that all of that is nothing at all
And thus to debase the magnificence of the Tantras—
Does this not cut down virtue's tree
With a blunt hatchet of words?

In fact, early Indian Buddhism was in some respects ambivalent about light imagery. Though the Buddha's awakening was often compared in early suttas to radiant light, strong currents in the early traditions resisted such positive imagery and preferred to understand the highest attainments in negative terms. Images of light and so forth were to be understood metaphorically, or as symptoms of penultimate realization. Though the miracles attributed to the Buddha are often described in terms of manifestations of light, these represent the Buddha's remarkable impact upon his disciples and others and are not thought to describe the highest enlightenment itself; they are merely a by-product

thereof. Though later Buddhism would always retain a tendency to favor the way of negation, nevertheless, it is equally true that imagery of light continues to develop, and indeed proliferates, in the sūtras of the Mahāyāna. In scriptures such as the *Laṅkāvatāra*, the *Gaṇḍavyūha*, and the *Daśabhūmika*, the relations between buddhas and bodhisattvas, and between the latter and the mundane realms in which they are active, are often described in terms of exchanges of light (plate 1), and the transmission of enlightenment and lesser blessings occurs via pathways of rays and luminous energies. Indeed, not a few of the buddhas of the Mahāyāna pantheon have names that accentuate their affinities with light: Amitābha ("Limitless Light") and Vairocana ("Radiant Splendor") are just the two best known examples. That the Buddha's teaching, the Dharma, is itself regarded metaphorically as light is demonstrated by the explicit occurrence of similes to this effect and by the titles of several important sūtras, most famously the *Suvarṇaprabhāsottama* (*Supreme Golden Light*).

Despite the effulgent imagery with which the discourses of the Mahāyāna are suffused, we must be very cautious about the interpretation of philosophical and mystical references to light and radiance even here. While it is clear that the authors of the Mahāyāna do wish to assert that the encounter of aspirants with buddhas and other exalted beings may be marked by intensive visions of light, it is much less clear that they wish to impart any sense of metaphysical ultimacy to these discourses of luminosity. An excellent, short example of this reticence may be found in connection with the interpretation of a very widely cited sentence near the beginning of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā* (*The Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Lines*): "Mind is not mind. The nature of mind is clear light" (tac cittam acittam. prakṛtiś cittasya prabhāsvarā). Though some later Tibetan authors do suggest that this lends support to the concept of a sort of luminous spiritual substance underlying the mind, the most influential of the Indian commentators on this text, Haribhadra, by contrast says: "Wherefore it is far removed from the nature of the one and the many, the *nature*, or essence, *of mind*, being unoriginated, *is clear light;* for the darkness of all conceptions of being is destroyed."[6] Thus, Haribhadra will commit himself to no more than a metaphorical interpretation of the light of the mind. In this, his perspective seems entirely continuous with the dominant scholastic trends of early Buddhism.

Tantric Buddhism, with its strong emphasis on techniques of visualization and yoga in which phenomena of light are intensely experienced, did reinforce the tendency to adopt pronouncedly cataphatic ways of speaking in later Indian Buddhism. Tibetan traditions inherited both this and, above all through the

Madhyamaka school of philosophy, a continuing scholastic emphasis on the *via negativa.* This is well exemplified by some of the ways in which light figures as a category in Indian and Tibetan yoga and Tantrism, particularly in the systems that came to be transmitted by the Kagyüpa (Bka'-brgyud-pa) order and those streams of Tibetan Tantrism most closely allied with it.

The Kagyüpa were founded in the eleventh century on the basis of the teachings of the Indian mahāsiddhas ("great adepts"), especially Tilopa, Nāropa, and Maitripa, and emphasized a system of Tantric yoga in which the experience of luminosity, or "clear light" (*'od-gsal*) was of central importance, for this was identified in some contexts with the fundamental ground of being.[7] The propensities that give rise to the diversity of mundane experience are sometimes described in Kagyüpa Tantric commentaries as originating in a primordial movement within the original ground, a movement thematized as "dark energy" (*mun-rlung*) that becomes ramified throughout the network of subtle energy channels constituting the esoteric reality (*guhyārtha, sbas-don*) of the body. The dialectic of light and dark (or pure and impure) energies within the body becomes a focal point of yogic practice, and, though the precise terminology varies to a great degree and often gives way to purely symbolic expression, it is a notable theme in much of Kagyüpa Tantric literature.

Nevertheless, Kagyüpa thought on this point is not in fact so manichaean as this may seem. That it is not is due primarily, I think, to the force of two important doctrinal tendencies. One, as we have already seen, is the extreme resistance, inherited from certain of the earlier Buddhist philosophical traditions, to an affirmative discourse concerning ultimate reality. Thus, even within Kagyüpa writings on yoga and meditation, luminosity is often treated as a description given by analogy to an experience or state that is in fact not capable of being described in ordinary language at all. A good example of this occurs in an influential manual on the Mahāmudrā, the "Great Seal," which is the pinnacle of Kagyüpa meditation instruction. The author, Götsangpa (Rgod-tshang-pa Mgon-po-rdo-rje, 1189–1258) is among the most admired of the early masters of the tradition, and here he says:

> The intention of all buddhas throughout the three times, naturally present in all sentient beings, and manifest in the appearance of the six aggregates [of the five physical senses and the intellect], is called "natural luminosity." But, however one designates it, it refers to the appearance of the six aggregates without contrivance. . . . Though one may assert it to be the clear light experienced, for instance, at death, nevertheless, in the absence of the realization of the dharmakāya [the "body of reality"], the luminosity [of which I am speaking here] remains ungrasped. That [experience of clear light at death]

is just mundane conceptual activity. Mundane conceptual activity is ignorance. And ignorance is the opposite of what we mean by "luminosity."[8]

The qualification "in the absence of the realization of the dharmakāya" is of course the crucial point here: it is not the experience of light per se that is enlightening, but rather the manner in which that, or for that matter any other experience, is itself understood. I shall return to the question of the experience of clear light at death shortly; obviously, this theme is most pertinent to our present subject matter.

A second doctrinal theme that militates against the tendency to attribute ultimacy to the phenomenal dichotomy of light and dark, at least in the context of yoga and meditation, is the general antidualism of the Mahāyāna. The opposition between the light of gnosis and dark energy must therefore be resolved in a realization that reaches the ground prior to their differentiation. We would expect that one result would be that on some occasions the phenomenon of darkness, or obscuration, itself comes to be revalued as an intimation of illuminating experience. As we shall see below, this is indeed what we do sometimes find in the literature.

With this in mind, then, let us turn to aspects of the literature itself and begin by considering a short verse treatise, *The Garland of Gems* (*Ratnamālā*) and the commentary on it.[9] The basic text is perhaps an Indian work, but the commentary, though attributed to the Indian master Abhayadatta, is certainly a Tibetan composition that may have originated as a Tibetan disciple's record of Abhayadatta's oral expositions of the verse text. The work is presented as an epitome of instructions on Tantrism and yogic practice stemming from the Indian Buddhist mahāsiddhas; in its content it is strongly allied with early Kagyüpa material though it is not clear to what extent the text as we have it was known within the early Kagyüpa tradition.[10]

The commentary treats the verses of *The Garland of Gems* as teachings delivered by several different mahāsiddhas to a maimed and tormented demoness in response to her quest for an antidote to her suffering. At the outset, the demoness requests the instruction of Lūipa, who says to her, "Your fault is not knowing your own nature. If you know that, you'll be freed from appearances, not to speak just of bodily appearances." When she then asks, "What's it to know your own nature?" he responds, "It is a luminous gnosis, in which the continuum of mundane reality comes to an end."

"Luminous gnosis" (*'od-gsal ye-shes, prabhāsvarajñāna*) is in fact the core soteriological concept in *The Garland of Gems*, and all of the instructions that follow are intended to amplify or clarify this concept, usually in response to the

demoness's protest, following each teaching, that she doesn't quite get what the siddhas are trying to teach her. We may share her puzzlement. Just what is the "luminous gnosis" of which Lūipa speaks? The commentary explains it as follows:

When the entire continuum of the attributions of existence, appearance, emptiness, idea, mind, and thought comes to an end, we speak of "luminous gnosis." Like the radiance of a precious gem, it is "incessant," and for this reason is characterized as "without boundary or center, and thus pervasive." Like uncompounded space, it embraces everything, from the highest heavens to the depths of hell. . . . It is "like the fire of Malaya Mountain" that incinerates all it encounters.

This passage well illustrates the ambivalence of light imagery in many Buddhist contexts, and the manner in which that ambivalence continued to inform Buddhist Tantrism and yoga. On the one hand, the luminosity of luminous gnosis seems clearly to be analogical, just as it had been in Haribhadra's definition, cited above: it refers to the "clearing" that is realized when all mundane conceptual activity comes to an end. On the other, the description is so reinforced by reference to the radiance of gems and of fire that it is difficult to conclude that there is no phenomenological content intended here whatsoever. This apparent ambivalence, however, does not at all characterize those later portions of the text that focus upon Tantric visualization techniques and exercises involving the subtle energies of the body. In these contexts, it seems certain that the phenomenological component of the light imagery is literally intended. Thus, for example, the verse that the siddha Mīnapa sings to the demoness:

The bodily vessel becomes elemental light,
A melting stream of divine ambrosia above.
In the mass of reality's light,
Conceptions of the six aggregates are exhausted.

The commentary explains:

This refers to the creative visualization of the deity . . . the bodily mansion becomes like a vase, filled with the light of the elements . . .

Atop that mansion of elemental light, you must contemplate a white HŪṂ which is in its nature a divinity embodying the essence of mind, radiating light, and from which there is a melting stream of ambrosia. It dissolves into the elements, intermingling thus with the bodily vase. Mind itself, in essence a divinity, of the nature of the elements, now dissolves into light. . . . The sign of contemplative success is an experience of outer warmth, and in this way one is clothed by the elements, while inner awareness is nourished by this contemplation, so that one is thus fed.

It is quite clear that in this case, whether we are referring to visualized or to visionary experience, "light" is being used to characterize those experiences phenomenologically. The analogical conception of luminous gnosis, however, has not been entirely forgotten. When the demoness is unable to make much progress in the visualization exercise just described, Nāgārjuna offers encouragement by explaining that her tormented condition would be "changed to bliss if she had the power to realize the *nature of mind* to be a mass of light, a solar orb." Given the diction of the text, the reference here to the "nature of mind," which also of course echoes Haribhadra's usage, points directly back to Lūipa's teaching of "luminous gnosis"—the phenomenal light of visionary experience is thus in the final analysis a token, a sign whose intention is that which transcends all experience that can be characterized in phenomenal terms.

I have argued so far that in *The Garland of Gems* light imagery is employed primarily in two ways: first, it refers analogically to transcendent gnosis, and in this usage remains ambivalent about the phenomenal features of luminosity as that is ordinarily understood; and, second, it refers phenomenologically to experiences of light that occur in connection with specific types of yoga and meditation practice. That these are indeed two distinct usages, but are nevertheless closely tied to one another in this tradition, is further emphasized in the concluding sections of the work, which discuss a system of yoga attributed to Tilopa, the Kagyüpa's major Indian patriarch. As elsewhere in the Kagyüpa traditions, Tilopa's teaching is broadly divided into two complementary aspects: there is the teaching of the abstract contemplation of the absolute, which is elsewhere called Mahāmudrā; and there are a series of methods of Tantric yoga which focus upon our ephemeral states of being. The first is summarized in the commentary as follows:

> Natural, luminous gnosis is the final significance of the view [of the Mahāmudrā]. It is the skylike body of reality, which is not engendered by any cause and is therefore without any result. . . . [I]n its essential nature, the skylike radiant light of mind can neither be exemplified nor designated.
>
> So, then, can no experience be cultivated of it?
>
> There is an experienceless cultivation of experience, meditationless meditation, incessant absorption, a result that is never to be attained, but from which one is never separated.

The text thus remains determined to avoid fixing in phenomenal terms its conception of the final significance of luminous gnosis.

If the foregoing represents Tilopa's teaching of the ultimate view of luminous gnosis, his description of its cultivation through meditation and yoga returns, as we have seen before, to emphasize experienced content. Here, he stresses that mind is to be understood as radiant light, and body as apparition, and that their connection is to be realized in the "liminal states" (*bar-do, antarābhava*) of waking experience, dream, and the passage from death to rebirth. Here the experiences of light, bliss, and embodiment are closely interrelated, providing the conditions whereby mundane embodiment becomes itself a vehicle of enlightenment. Referring to the waking state during our present lifetime, for example, the text tells us:

> The liminal passage from birth to death is the period during which all sorts of conceptions become concretely manifest, so that one is embodied in the "body of karmic maturation." But conceptual activity may be disclosed as luminous in nature, and this luminousness in turn may be intermingled with the emotions and passions, purifying them. How so? On the path of transformation one holds the conceptions to be gods and goddesses, while on the path of desire one engenders bliss while relying upon the subtle channels and fluids, and on the path of liberation one engenders bliss relying upon the Inner Heat of the body. Finally, on the path of great liberation, one does not hanker after those sorts of bliss at all, but realizes them to be of the nature of radiant light and so intermingles radiant light with passion.

The text later expands upon this notion of radiant light, in its relation to the psychophysical regime of Tantric yoga and meditation upon the absolute, in these words:

> When proficiency in the Inner Heat is achieved by day, radiant light comes to be grasped by night in four ways: there is the natural radiant light, which is the purity of all phenomena; the radiant light of concentration, arising in the contemplative experience of the yogin in union with his consort; the radiant light of sleep, when coarse mental activity comes to a halt in deep sleep; and the radiant light of death, arising when, during the liminal passage between death and rebirth, the bodily elements are deceased.

Radiant light, then, though in the final analysis free from phenomenal qualifications, is nevertheless disclosed in phenomenal modalities that differ in relation to the experienced framework: as the bliss of the Inner Heat, arising most forcefully in the yoga of sexual union; as the subdued and pervading clarity that accompanies the cessation of mental activity in trance and deep sleep; or as the light refracted into bewildering multiplicity of experiences characterizing both the dream state and the dreamlike state of consciousness migrating from death to rebirth.

Earlier, I mentioned that there is a sense in which, because the ultimate transcends the dichotomy of light and darkness, it must embrace darkness too. This is not an explicit theme in our present text, but it is suggested in one passage in connection with the teaching attributed to the weaver Tantipa, whose cryptic verse reads:

Free from both renunciation and possession,
If you come to know, you'll not enter bewilderment's city.
But like Nanda and the gemstone light,
You'll find the city itelf to be supreme bliss.

The commentary explains that as Nanda, the king of the nāgas, perceives the light of the wish-granting gem that is invisible to all others, in the same way the adept perceives that the "city" of obscuration and bewilderment *is* the domain of luminous gnosis, of the highest bliss. Elsewhere, Kagyüpa writers may treat darkness itself as an expression of luminosity—the clarity of night seems to converge with the clarity of day. A fine example of this is found in the writings of the sixteenth-century Karmapa hierarch Mikyö Dorje (Karma-pa VIII Mi-bskyod-rdo-rje, 1507–54), who recounts that in the midst of a vision of the poet-sage Milarepa, he becomes absorbed by the blackness of Milarepa's hair: it is the blackest black he has ever seen, blacker than anything, and yet it is of the nature of light.[11]

If darkness can, in a sense, point to the light, the reverse is sometimes also the case: the yogin's experiences of light, in and of themselves, may in fact be expressions of ignorance. This is a well-formed theme in Kagyüpa meditation manuals, and we have seen an example earlier, in the words of Götsangpa. Starting with the simple dichotomy of light and dark, therefore, we find that these opposites pervade one another, that in some sense light and dark are no different. Their interpretation, both in texts and in contemplative practice, is subtle and not always evident. And this is without regard to the many differing modalities of light—dim, radiant, or effulgent; diffused, refracted or sparkling, monotonal or multicolored; internal or external; holographic or unidimensional; and so on—that pervade the texts of Tibetan religious traditions.[12] The color codes of Tibetan Tantric iconography also merit consideration in this context, but about this I limit myself to one observation that is particularly appropriate here: the blue color of the primordial buddha Vajradhara, the embodment of the ultimate reality that is the dharmakāya according to the Kagyüpa tradition, may be described and depicted as either the light blue of a clear and bright daytime sky or the near black of a moonless night (plate 2).

THE CLEAR LIGHT OF DEATH

If you say that in this degenerate age,
The [body of light] has never been observed to occur,
That would amount to rejection of doctrine . . .
Do you wish to affirm that nowadays,
In this land of snow mountains,
The teaching of the Vajrayāna is no more?

In the teaching of the Kagyüpa master Götsangpa, we have seen that he was at pains to distinguish the luminosity of the mind, as realized by the adept in meditation, from the phenomenal experience of clear light at death. This, he said, if not involving the realization of the dharmakāya, the "body of reality" that is the ultimate nature of things, the metaphysical ground of the Buddha's awakening, is merely an expression of nescience. In the Kagyüpa and other Tibetan Tantric traditions, instructions relating to death are in fact among the primary topics in relation to which the theme of mind's luminous nature is developed. This may be illustrated by the *Instructions Concerning the Liminal State* (*Bar-do'i gdams-pa*) composed by the eleventh- to twelfth-century adept Khyungpo Neljor.[13]

The widespread promulgation of Indian Tantrism in Tibet from the eleventh century onward encouraged the treatment of death, in some contexts, as the occasion for the application of specific techniques of Tantric yoga and meditation which, ideally at least, would have been practiced by the adept in the course of his or her earlier training. Significantly, knowledge of such techniques was also assimilated to what appears to have been an autochthonous Tibetan custom of calling the dead, so that a body of literature arose in which funerary rituals and Tantric instructions were to some extent integrated with one another. The culmination of this process occurred with the appearance, probably in the fourteenth century, of the so-called "Tibetan Book of the Dead."[14]

Khyungpo Neljor, in relation to these developments, appears as a bridge figure. Originally trained within the traditions of the Bön religion and the old Nyingmapa order of Tibetan Buddhism, he turned from these to participate in the new influx of Indian Tantrism into Tibet that occurred during the eleventh century. Nevertheless, it is not always clear in his works just where we are to draw the line between indigenous Tibetan and Indian themes and motifs. For example—and this is an example pertinent to our theme of the body of light—when in the course of his travels in India he encounters the enigmatic woman adept, Niguma, who will become his main teacher, his hagiography offers this description:

I wandered throughout India, and asked, "Who, among the accomplished masters, seems to have come face to face with the Buddha himself?" The paṇḍitas and siddhas concurred, "That would be the Paṇḍita Nāropa's lady, the ḍākinī of enlightened awareness called 'Niguma.' She abides in the three pure stations [i.e., the eighth through tenth bodhisattva stations, from which there is no falling back], and she has really requested instruction in the dharma from the great Vajradhara himself." When I asked where she was residing just then, I was told that those of pure vision might meet her anywhere, but that one of impure vision could search everywhere for her without success; for she dwelt upon the pure stations, and her embodied form had become the stuff of rainbows.[15]

Often, Indian traditions concerning the great Buddhist Tantric adepts speak of them passing from this world into the realm of the "sky-farers" (*khecara*). The allusion to a rainbow embodiment in this case may, however, reflect a Tibetan trope. A similar caution must apply to our reading of Khyungpo Neljor's *Instructions Concerning the Liminal State.* In the opening sections of this text, the author establishes a general framework based on the states of waking consciousness, dream, and death that broadly accords with what we know of Tilopa's teachings as summarized in the *Garland of Gems,* and about which Khyungpo writes:

Now, the ground to be purified by the yogin consists of the three bodies of the liminal states, and they are purified [respectively] by these three: [the practices of Tantric yoga known as] creation-and-perfection, dream, and luminosity. . . . The three bodies of the liminal states are those of the liminal state of birth-and-death, the liminal state of the dream, and the liminal state of possible being.

The first, the liminal state of birth-and-death, is the duration from birth until death, and is the body of maturation. . . . Having amassed many virtues and sins, which mature as the varied pleasures and pains one experiences, this [physical body] is the body of maturation.

Second: having gone to sleep, until one awakens, there is the liminal state of the dream, which is the body of latent dispositions. . . . It is the body of latent dispositions because the mass of the latent dispositions of this lifetime comes forth in dreams.

Third: from death until one takes birth there is the liminal state of possible being, the body of mind.

The body of maturation is purified by [the visualization of] the body of the deity. . . . The body of latent dispositions is purified by the emanation and transformation of the dream. . . . The body of mind is purified by luminosity.

The framework for Khyungpo Neljor's teaching, therefore, is precisely similar to that which we have examined above, in connection with the *Garland of Gems.* Khyungpo Neljor's primary concern, however, is with last of the three liminal states, that of the body of mind that is purified by luminosity during

the passage intervening between death and rebirth. The liminal state itself unfolds in three stages corresponding to the dissolution of consciousness into luminosity at death, the visionary experiences of the period that follows, and the subsequent entry into a realm of rebirth. The first of these is characterized by the clear light experienced at death that had been mentioned by Götsangpa. In Khyungpo Neljor's text, this is described in some detail. Here Khyungpo directs the adept to realize that the luminosity identified with the ultimate nature of the mind and the experience of clear light at death are really no different. In other words, the adept is to overcome the failure to grasp the underlying reality without which the experience of clear light alone is merely "mundane conceptual activity":

One should evidently realize that both the luminosity that has been meditatively cultivated [during one's lifetime] . . . and the spontaneously arisen, natural luminosity [occurring at death] are no different. . . . Because form first dissolves into sound, forms become indistinct. When sound dissolves into odor, the ear no longer hears. After odors dissolve into taste, the nose does not smell them. Because taste dissolves into the tactile, the tongue does not experience taste. After tactile sensation dissolves into abstract phenomena and the complexion of the body goes bad, bodily sensations are then no longer felt. Such is the dissolution of objects. After that there is the dissolution of the elements. As is said . . .

> First earth dissolves into water.
> Then water dissolves into fire.
> After fire has dissolved into wind,
> Wind, too, dissolves into consciousness.
> Consciousness, the apprehending subject,
> Proceeds [to dissolve] even as far as luminosity.

Thus, as noted earlier, "luminosity" is what remains when all else has been stripped away, whether in the yogin's cultivation of an intense concentration in which all objectivizations are systematically eliminated or through the process of dissolution at death. Training in Tantric methods of contemplation is intended to render it possible to recognize this luminosity of death, without being overcome by it, in which case, as Götsangpa had warned, it "remains ungrasped." For the yogin who does comprehend the process of dissolution, however, it is essential to attend to the precise modalities of luminosity that now unfold. Khyungpo Neljor continues:

After consciousness has dissolved into luminosity, four cognitions arise: [they are called] appearance, diffuse appearance, appropriation, and possession. With respect to them these five marks arise . . . :

First, it is like a mirage,
Second, like the moon,
Third, like the sun,
Fourth, like darkness,
And fifth, like a cloudless sky,
In which the nonconceptual,
without limit or center, will arise.

The four cognitions are each described in some detail, so that Khyungpo supplies a nuanced phenomenology of the dissolution of consciousness in the experience of light. The first cognition, called "appearance," is characterized as follows:

[W]hen consciousness dissolves into luminosity, the outer mark is like the moonrise, while the inner mark is like the occurrence of a mirage, with light rays of five colors. At that time, abiding with sparkling clarity in the nonconceptual cognition called "appearance," the first instant occurs. . . . At that time, because aversion is not borne even towards a murderous enemy, it is called "empty."

The precise significance of the distinction between the "outer mark" and "inner mark" is not made explicit, but it is nevertheless elucidated to some degree in the passages that follow. In essence, these suggest that the concern here is the distinction between the field of consciousness and the contents thereof. All has in any case now dissolved into luminosity, but that luminosity is not experienced as an invariant ether; it is a sphere of experience in which certain characteristic phenomena, whose natures are equally luminous, are disclosed. Khyungpo adheres to a fixed mode of exposition, specifying the outer and inner mark, in treating the moments that follow:

Second, when "appearance" dissolves into "diffusion," the outer mark is like sunrise, while the inner mark is like the occurrence of fireflies. At that time, abiding in startling clarity in the nonconceptual gnosis called "diffusion," which is exceedingly clear and free from the conception of the apprehending subject, the second instant occurs. . . . At that time, no desire arises even for divine boys or girls, so that it is called "great emptiness."

In the next phase, a theme we have encountered earlier, that of the convergence of luminosity and darkness, is elaborated:

Third, the dissolution of "diffusion" into "appropriation": the outer sign is thick blackness, like dark nightfall. The inner sign arises that is like a lamp unmoved by the wind. At that time, there is "appropriation," a nonconceptual gnosis that is clear and without

any subjective apprehension. . . . That phase, when there arises pristine clarity, of the nature of light, is called "extremely empty."

The light that dawns within that darkness is marked by the subsiding of all remaining tendencies to conceptual activity and objectification. The subtle duality that originates at the moment of conception is here at last resolved. Though thoroughly free from conceptual activity, it is a state that is nevertheless described in affective terms as "blissful":

Fourth, when "appropriation" dissolves into "possession," the outer sign is like the rising of the morning star at dawn, while the inner sign is like the clear autumn sky suffused by the brilliance of the sun. After that, the white and red aspects of father and mother [= semen and blood], as the pair A-HAṂ [= e-go], meet at the heart, whereupon there arises the experience of bliss and emptiness. At that time there is "possession," called "natural luminosity." Free from all the taints of conceptual craving, one abides in the fourth instant in that nonconceptual bliss and clarity, unobjectified and surpassing the intellect. . . . Because that cognition causes [all affective and dualistic] conceptions . . . , subtle and coarse, . . . to dissolve in luminosity and cease, it is called the pristine cogntion wherein all is naturally empty. It is said . . . ,

> Just as various clouds,
> Having different colors and shapes,
> Arise from the expanse of the sky
> And return, indeed, to that,
> So all natures,
> Entities characterized by three [modes of] appearance,
> Which, without exception, involve objectifications,
> Will dissolve in luminosity.

That this is precisely what is meant by the "luminosity of death" in this context is made explicit in a concluding recapitulation:

"Appearance" is the luminosity that is cultivated [in contemplative practice], "diffusion" is the luminosity of absorption [in deep meditation], "appropriation" is the unsoiled, uncorrupted luminosity, and "possession" is the natural luminosity that is an inherent principle. . . . And that, moreover, is called the "body of reality at death." For, as Āryadeva says:

> Death is absolute truth, while birth is the relative.

Thus, it may be called the "luminosity of death," or the "natural luminosity." One who has previously become accustomed to luminosity [in contemplative practice], and abides in that, [merging] with natural luminosity, like the meeting of mother and son,

will not see the cities of the six families [of rebirth] in the liminal state thereafter. Rather, from that unborn luminosity the [buddhas'] two bodies of form incessantly, naturally arise, emerging in spontaneous presence. The one [who realizes this] matures and liberates all sentient beings, each one in accord with his or her needs, until saṃsāra is emptied. As it says in the *Play of Pristine Gnosis* and other Tantras:

> The individual who has grasped luminosity
> Does not see the cities of the liminal state,
> But arises for the sake of others in the body of form,
> Like the gem that grants all wishes.

Such is the one of highest acumen, who, by attaining the Great Seal in a single lifetime, is awakened as a buddha.

By contrast, those of us who fail to realize the nature of this light of the dharmakāya will reemerge from an ephemeral absorption in it, to continue to migrate in the liminal state until driven by the force of karma to an appropriate realm of rebirth:

> [W]hen one who is not much accustomed to luminosity cannot remain in the luminosity of that first liminal state [which includes all the phases discussed so far], then for three and a half days of the first week visions of the body of one's former life will emerge, including one's country, house, wealth, possessions, and relations, and when the sensory faculties are all complete, one will then have a mental body. . . . At that time, one does not know oneself to be in the liminal state.

Owing to this unknowing, luminosity now drifts confusedly into dreamlike visions that finally become concrete as one meanders into circumstances fit for rebirth.

Khyungpo Neljor's *Instructions Concerning the Liminal State* very well exemplifies the manner in which the process of death, and its relation to the contemplative experience of light as engendered through methods of Tantric yoga, came to be conceived in Tibetan religious culture generally; but specifically it represents the perspective of those traditions that were most influenced by the Indian Buddhist Tantrism of the early second millenium. Clearly, "light" does not describe univocally a particular type of religious experience, but instead characterizes a broad experiential sphere requiring a fuller phenomenology to disclose its varied modalities. Significantly, too, it demonstrates that, for Tibetan Buddhist Tantric thought, there is a sense in which everyone dissolves into light at death. What is conspicuously absent is the notion that this dissolution may sometimes become physically manifest, through the adept's attainment of a rainbow body. Indian Tantrism and yoga had attributed such powers as celestial flight and physical disappearance to certain adepts, regarding

these as significant but not ultimate attainments. Nevertheless, it appears that the Indian background of many aspects of Tibetan Buddhism supplies only part of what we need in order to understand the conception of the reduction of the body to light in Tibetan religious culture.[16]

EARLY TIBETAN ILLUMINATIONS

Because mere invisibility
May be due to obscurations caused by daemons of the eight classes,
Something more than that alone
Is needed as a proof of faith.

The texts we have surveyed above—the commentary on the *Garland of Gems* of the mahāsiddha tradition and Khyungpo Neljor's *Instructions Concerning the Liminal State*—are Tibetan works dating to about 1100 and strongly reflect the ascendancy of Indian Buddhist Tantrism in Tibet during the period in which they were composed. While they illustrate the prominence of light imagery in that context, they do not yet hint at the actual dissolution of the physical person into light, with perhaps the exception of Khyungpo's description of his teacher Niguma as embodied in the "stuff of rainbows" (though, as we have seen, this perhaps reflects a Tibetan rather than an Indian trope). Of course, there is a sense in which the person may be said to dissolve into light at death, but it is the mind, not the body that so dissolves; no claim is advanced that this dissolution into luminosity occurs in the shared domain of common sensory experience. Apparently, then, the Indianized dimensions of Tibetan religion do not by themselves explain the remarkable conception of the rainbow body. We must turn now, therefore, to examine some of the other sources of Tibetan Buddhist thought on this matter.

The ancient kings of Tibet, from whose line the monarchs of the seventh- to ninth-century Tibetan empire arose, were held to be divine in origin. The first seven kings, known collectively as the "seven heavenly thrones" (*gnam-la khri-bdun*), demonstrated their divinity at death by leaving no earthly remains at all. A twelfth-century work offers this description:

> With reference to those seven [kings known as the "seven heavenly thrones"], they possessed, on their crowns, the so-called divine daemon cord [*lha'i smu-thag*]. This was a ray of white light. When those seven passed from suffering [in Buddhist usage this would mean "attained nirvāṇa"] and journeyed to the realm of the gods, they dissolved into light from their feet upwards, and after the light faded into the sky, they left no corpses behind. So it is said that the mausoleums of the seven thrones were planted in space.[17]

As we shall see below, some Tibetan Buddhist writers were inclined to associate reports of the rainbow body primarily with beliefs such as these, and not at all with the properly Buddhist light imagery we have examined earlier. However that may be, it is clear that the equation among divinity, kingship, light, and elevation in space is an ancient and compelling dimension of the autochthonous Tibetan religious system. Moreover, it is equally clear that these associations in some respects lent themselves to an assimilation with the Indian Buddhist imagery of light. If, for example, Khyungpo Neljor's description of Niguma as an embodiment of rainbows reflects a Tibetan trope, it should now be apparent that the Indian image of "sky-faring" would have readily been interpreted in relation to indigenous Tibetan conceptions of the close association among divinity, light, and sky.

In addition to the Tibetan cultural background and the influx of Indian Buddhism that began in the eighth century, there were several other important sources of the developing Tibetan religious culture of the late first millennium which, in one way or another, accentuated the religious significance of light. We know, for instance, that the Iranian world played a role here, and that Manichaeism in particular became to some extent known during the age of the Tibetan empire, as did Nestorian Christianity. Nevertheless, we cannot now trace the precise impact of Iranian and Middle Eastern religions upon the Tibetan world in any detail.[18]

Chinese religious traditions also assumed considerable importance in early medieval Tibet, and here the evidence is clearer. A ninth-century Tibetan Chan text found at Dunhuang, for example, provides brief hagiographical accounts of a lineage of teachers, and peculiar light phenomena are regularly mentioned in the accounts of their deaths. A good example is found in the hagiography of the final member of the lineage, the Tibetan adept Namkei Nyingpo:

> The preceptor Namkei Nyingpo, having worshipped the emanation [*sprul-pa*] of Trhiga Shingyong (Khri-ga-shing-yong), gave forth light from his body. Again, when he entered the place of retreat at Yam-yog, wonders appeared such as his being accompanied by a five-colored cloud. Meditatively cultivating the path of the doctrine in a single lifetime, he reached the culmination of his commitment to abide in the ascetic virtues. Thereafter, in his seventy-first year, on the twenty-ninth day of the spring month *ra-ba*, during a dog year, he adopted the unwavering vajra-posture in the retreat place of Zhong-pong and passed beyond time without change of complexion. That night, in the middle of the night, two great lights continuously arose in the sky between Srin-po Peak and the ridge of Zhong-pong Mountain, below the hermitage, and the whole district was illuminated until they set in the west. Many countrymen saw it in common, including Pelgi Gyeltsen (Dpal-gyi-rgyal-mtshan), master of the *saṃgha* of

the Ten Directions, 'Byi-lig, and Gwan Lodrö ('Gwan Blo-gros). At the conclusion of the sevenfold rites, there was a religious feast for five hundred gods and men. After prayers were recited, during the third watch in the middle of the night, at the base of the cliff behind the hermitage, a great light arose and passed away in the western direction.[19]

It is quite clear that aspects of this narrative resemble reports of adepts' deaths that we find in the later literature of the Great Perfection traditions. One may no doubt also detect here some affinity with Chinese accounts of the *Lives of Eminent Monks,* whose death narratives have been studied by Jacques Gernet.[20] (Compare, too, the visions of light described in Raoul Birnbaum's chapter below.) As Gernet notes, the Chinese Buddhist hagiographies may be in some respects related to those of Taoist adepts and immortals. On referring to a collection of the lives of the immortals, the *Liexian zhuan,* which has been studied and translated by Max Kaltenmark, one in fact finds many interesting points of comparison. Thus, for example, the hagiography of Ningfengzi tells us that he was "capable of producing smoke tinted with five colors,"[21] which recalls Namkei Nyingpo's five-colored cloud. As will be seen below, the resemblances between certain of the death narratives in Taoist and Tibetan hagiographies are far more suggestive than just this alone.

THE WAY OF THE GREAT PERFECTION

On the day [of Pema Düdül's death] the inner and outer conjunctions
Obscured the suns of a billion worlds,
And for seven days rainbows and rays and masses of light
Were directly perceived surging through space,
Causing ordinary appearance to disappear—
Wouldn't it be mad to disavow this?
At that time, among the persons who assembled there—
The Kathok Dzarka incarnation [Kaṭ-thog 'Dzar-ka sprul-sku] and many others
Endowed with peerless learning and discernment,
As well as many hundreds of ordinary folk,
Who, having first heard of [Pema Düdül's] passing, gathered together—
What they actually, inerrantly saw
In direct perception common to all
Was like a risen sun that they could not obscure
Even when they attempted to shield [their eyes] with their hands.

In its origins, the Tibetan contemplative tradition of the Great Perfection (*rdzogs-chen*) remains mysterious. Samten Karmay, in his monograph *The Great Perfection,* has presented several of the most important Dunhuang docu-

ments relating to the Great Perfection systems, so we need not duplicate his efforts here.[22] The texts he has studied date to about the ninth century, and the Great Perfection as presented within them is an extremely spare, often markedly apophatic approach to Buddhist meditation. This is illustrated by the short *Rig-pa'i khu-byug* (*The Cuckoo of Awareness*), a famous work for the later tradition whose earliest version has been identified by Karmay among the Dunhuang texts:

Svāsti! Homage to the glory of glories, the transcendent lord Samantabhadra, who is the vajra of body, speech, and mind, and great bliss spontaneously perfected!

As varied nature is nondual,
Even in diffusion it is without elaboration.
Though there is no conception of just-what-is,
It is effulgent (Vairocana) and omnibeneficent (Samantabhadra).
Renouncing the disease of grasping effort,
One becomes settled, abiding spontaneously.[23]

The Great Perfection teaching, as revealed in such materials, appears to be in most respects closely related to other Mahāyāna systems of nonconceptual contemplation, but it nevertheless involves a distinctively Tantric frame of reference, marked here, for instance, in the prologue introducing the verses by its invocation of the "three secrets," the "vajra of body, speech, and mind." Its reference, in the fourth verse line, to the esoteric buddha Vairocana-Samantabhadra[24] probably is intended, as reflected in my translation, as a double-entendre: it identifies the nondual nature of things with buddhahood, while using the buddha's name and epithet as descriptive expressions as well. If this is correct, then the mention of Vairocana here perhaps previsions the important role of light imagery in the later, developed Great Perfection traditions. In the course of their development, on the basis of the humble beginnings represented in such short texts as *The Cuckoo of Awareness,* those traditions expanded to become an enormously elaborated family of esoteric systems within the Bön religion and the Buddhist Nyingmapa order, and this occurred during the ninth through twelfth centuries. This is not the place to review these properly historical questions, but it is significant that the first narratives of adepts passing into the body of light seem also to date from this time. These include the legendary accounts of the Indian patriarchs of the Great Perfection traditions, accounts that were almost certainly not derived from India.[25] Here, I shall focus upon the stories of a line of Tibetan adepts that perhaps do refer to historical persons, even though the tales as we now know them are largely legendary in character.

In question are the hagiographies of the lineage of the Great Perfection teachings known as the Great Perfection in the Area of Mind (*rdzogs-chen sems-phyogs*) and the Vajra Bridge (*rdo-rje zam-pa*).[26] In these tales, curiously recapitulating the history of the ancient Tibetan kings, we find a line of seven successive figures, beginning with the celebrated translator Vairocana, who disappear at death, until finally the masters of this teaching begin to die leaving their bodies behind. The figures concerned are said to have lived during the late eighth through early eleventh centuries. The theme of the rainbow body is clearly in evidence in the lives of three hermits—Vairocana's disciple Pang Mipham Gönpo (Spang Mi-pham-mgon-po) and his disciples—who shared the same retreat cave in far eastern Tibet and in great old age all vanished in the same year:

In this way, the bodies of the three masters and disciples vanished in the Wa Senge [Fox Lion] Cavern during the same year of the snake, one after the other, like mists, or rainbows, fading away.

It is, however, in the hagiographies of their three successors—Nyang Cangcup-tra, Nyang Sherap Jungne, and Bagom—that a fuller narrative begins to emerge. The accounts of the first two are initially presented in extremely spare terms.

Nyang Cangcup-tra . . . vanished without a trace, like a cloud disintegrating on a mountainside. . . .

Nyang Sherap Jungne . . . experienced the naturally manifest, unbiased intention of the Great Perfection, and, after hanging his robe, rosary, and skull-cup on a juniper tree on the summit of Lhari in Phukpoche, his body vanished in the sky, just like a brilliant rainbow.

The life of their successor Bagom, however, adds to these brief notes a report of the specific signs of contemplative mastery they demonstrated that presaged their attainment of the rainbow body. Here is what takes place when Nyang Cangcup-tra comes to visit his disciple and grand-disciple:

As master Sherap Jungne and Bagom looked on from the left and the right, the master, who was between them, became invisible. As their astonishment grew, he changed into a whirlwind one cubit high, which, after spinning to and fro, turned into a fire. The fire then turned into a bronze bowl for water-offerings, filled to the point of overflowing. Then, in a fury, it turned abruptly into the master himself. When he had thus revealed his power over the activity field in which the four elements are overcome, he said, "From the time when the impurities of the elements are removed, and until their pure essences vanish, this may occur. . . . [I]t is most important to remain undistracted."

And later Nyang Sherap Jungne repeats his master's wonderful trick:

Once when Bagom went to gather wood in the forest of Pelbu, he saw the red glow of a fire around their thatched cottage; but the master had not lit a fire. Thinking the house was ablaze, Bagom went to investigate, but the thatched cottage appeared as before without a sign of fire. When he asked him what had happened, the master replied, "I became absorbed in the contemplation of fire. Do you not remember my guru, Nyang Cangcup-tra?"

Finally, in the narration of Bagom's own death, though tradition does hold him to have attained the body of light, it is released only in the course of his cremation. The account interestingly resembles in part that of the death of the eastern Tibetan Chan master Namkei Nyingpo, which we have seen above. Moreover, in its report of the concealment of the corpse in a family shrine and the perception of uncanny lights by persons outside, it is also similar to the recent account of the rainbow body with which this chapter began:

In his ninety-eighth year he passed away without sickness. His wife, Como Kangmo, did not show the body to outsiders, but she cremated it in the household shrine. All of the people outside saw a pot-sized ball of light go off into the sky. No remains at all were left behind.

Despite the variations in the rainbow body narrations we find here, it is clear that the attainment of the rainbow body has now begun to be regarded as a sign of spiritual perfection within the Great Perfection traditions. As a result, the failure of recognized masters to pass away in a body of light itself comes to be seen as an aberrant phenomenon requiring some explanation. This emerges already in the hagiography of Bagom's successor, Dzeng Dharmabodhi (ca. late eleventh to early twelfth centuries):

During his cremation the sky was filled with rainbows. Many relics and stūpas were discovered [among his ashes]. Because he continued to protect his disciples, his impure body did not dissolve into the rainbow body; but, in fact, he fulfilled all the signs of having passed into nirvāṇa on the primordially pure level which is beyond all phenomena.

The notion that an active involvement with disciples is an obstacle to the attainment of the rainbow body emerges as a distinct theme in a number of other works concerning personages of approximately the same time period, as it does here, in the hagiography of one of Dzeng Dharmabodhi's most renowned contemporaries, Zurcung Sherap-tra (1014–74):

Lama Zurcungpa resolved to remain absorbed in practice for twenty-four continuous years on Mount Trak Gyawo, and so to pass away in the rainbow body. . . . At one point he spent a long period without even his attendant coming to serve him. Eventually, when no trace of smoke or noise emerged from his hermitage, the attendant, fearing

that some illness had befallen the master, went to investigate. He found the guru with his mouth and nose covered with cobwebs. Thinking that he had passed away, he cried out loud. The master's concentration was disturbed and he said, "If I had remained in that state I would have become free from this burdensome skull! Now I shall have to take rebirth once more." . . . It appears that [this account refers to] the indication of success on the path, whereby the body becomes many particles of the pure essence [i.e., light] alone, [which takes place] when [clinging to] reality is exhausted all at once.[27]

It is, of course, in relation to accounts such as these that we must understand the puzzlement expressed by Mipham's companions in reaction to the reports of the death of Pema the Demon Tamer, which motivated them to exclaim in disbelief that "he was maintaining a retinue and disciples!"

In the preceding section, based upon the evidence of a Tibetan Chan text from Dunhuang, I suggested that Chinese hagiographical traditions may be among the sources of inspiration for the materials we are considering. And it will not be difficult to discern many points of contact with Raoul Birnbaum's investigations later in this book. (It is perhaps significant, in this regard, that Mount Wutai was an important site of Tibetan-Chinese religious interaction.) Interestingly, however, it turns out to be in the Taoist accounts of the immortals that we find some of the most striking similarities. Marcel Granet, for instance, discusses the hagiographical use of the logograph *yin*, "le terme caractéristique de la *retraite-évanouissement* des sages dits taoïstes," which refers especially to sages dissolving into mountains. In Granet's view, the mysterious disappearance of the sage at death may be related to his refusal of kingship, which recalls for us that in Tibet the conception of the dissolution into light at death first appears to have concerned royal death in particular.[28]

The *Liexian zhuan*, mentioned earlier, affords further points of comparison. Throughout this work, as Max Kaltenmark remarks, "le dieu ou le chamane devient lui-même fumée, nuage et pluie."[29] This is precisely what we have seen in the accounts of Nyang Cangcup-tra and Nyang Sherap Jungne above. Another prominent theme is *shi jie*, translated by Kaltenmark as "délivrance par une mort apparente."[30] In the biography of Huangdi, for instance, we read:

Quand arriva le jour de sa mort, on le ramena au mont K'iao pour l'enterrer. (Plus tard) la montagne s'écroula: le cercueil était vide et le corps avait disparu; seules son épée et ses sandales étaient encore présentes.[31]

And in the biography of Lu Zhang:

Il se nourrissait de nénufars, de mousses et de moelle de roches. Au bout de deux cents ans, il annonça sa propre mort. Des troubles empêchèrent qu'on ne procédât à l'enterrement définitif. Plus tard, lorsque son fils (Lu) Ki voulut l'inhumer, il ne trouva pas le

cadavre, seul un ouvrage intitulé le *Sceau de Jade* en six chapitres se trouvait dans le cercueil.[32]

Such accounts immediately recall Tibetan hagiographical accounts like that of Nyang Sherap Jungne, whose body vanished after he had left "his robe, rosary, and skull-cup on a juniper tree on the summit of Lhari in Phukpoche," as well as the more recent testimony of Pema Düdül's biography: "The lord's robes and meditation seat, his hair and the nails of his fingers and toes were there on his bed, but the maṇḍala of his body had disappeared."

Before leaving this brief excercise in Tibeto-Taoist comparison it will be worthwhile to note as well the elaboration of remarkably similar typologies of saintly death within the two traditions. The *Neipian*, a fourth-century Chinese treatise, states:

> According to scriptures on transcendence, superior practitioners who rise up in their bodies and ascend into the void are termed celestial transcendents (*tianxian*). Middle-level practitioners who wander among noted mountains are termed earth-bound transcendents (*dixian*). Lesser practitioners who first "die" and then slough off (*xiansi houtuo*) are termed "escape-by-means-of-a-corpse-simulacrum transcendents" (*shijie xian*).[33]

A millennium later, in one of the masterworks of the Tibetan Great Perfection, the *Treasury of the Supreme Vehicle*, the renowned Longchen Rabjampa (Klong-chen Rab-'byams-pa, 1308–63) offers this much elaborated scheme:

> Concerning the ways of death among the highest [adepts,] there are four, namely, ways of death resembling sky-farers, knowledge holders, conflagrations, and the sky. When the yogin of highest perseverance passes away directly without remains, it is as when a sky-farer dies, her corpse perceived by no one at all. This is a sign of awakening in buddhahood, without any intervening liminal state. A supreme yogin, in order to establish others in the teaching, may vanish in the sight of the public in the midst of a mass of light and accompanied by sounds and lights. This resembles the knowledge holders who, when they ascend to ever higher planes, do so bodily, going into the sky with sounds and lights that are visible to all. It is a sign that one will act on behalf of beings by means of inconceivable emanations throughout inconceivable realms. This occurred, for example, in the case of the great lord among yogins, Cetsün Senge Wangcuk.[34] As for the manner of death for a yogin who has reached the ends of experiential cultivation, it is a death that resembles the spontaneous extinction of great conflagrations that have consumed the fuel that was their material cause. It is a sign that the afflictions are liberated at the very site of their origination, that the elements, which are their material cause, are exhausted, and that one has arrived at a deconcretion of corporeal conditions. Examples are the mother and brother of Dampa Gyer, who both emerged from a cave in Tsari, blazing in a mass of light, and then vanished in space. In the way

of death that is like the sky, when the atomically constituted body of the yogin, who is established on the plane of primordial purity, breaks like a pot, there is an intermingling as one, free from the sequence of before and after. So long as bodily appearance remains, it is like the space from which substance has been removed, while realization, or primordial purity, abides in the luminosity of the heart within the body. As when a pot breaks, so that the space within and the space without become so intermingled that one cannot tell them apart, here one is awakened in buddhahood, not distinguishing the body that has been reduced to its atomic constituents from the awareness within. This is a sign of liberation that has penetrated the plane of primordial purity.

In those cases, both the ways of death of the sky and sky-farers are ways of death due to Cutting Through Resistance, which establishes primordial purity, in which the body is reduced to its atomic constituents. The ways of death of both the conflagration and the knowledge holders are those of liberation in the spontaneous presence of All-Surpassing Realization.[35]

If one asks, wherefore such ways of death? they may emerge when there breaks open an expanse in which as a sign of conviction in the natural Great Perfection, one's mind will not tend toward common religious systems; as a sign that its significance has been mastered, one who directly perceives its significance is unpreoccupied with verbal analysis; because one has mastered the realization of primordial purity, one has recognized one's future destination; because death is no longer fearsome, one performs no longevity sādhanas or death avoidance rites whatsoever; because one acquires effortless confidence regarding the abiding nature of reality, one abandons all activities of the three gates [of body, speech, and mind]; and, because one has realized everything to be the great primordial emptiness, without ground, and so is, with respect to anything, free from apprehensions of substance and attribute, one departs from the fundamental disposition of reality for not even an instant.

For such yogins there is no need for prognostications of the signs of death, rites to avoid it, or spiritual exercises [specifically relating to death]. Having transcended view and meditation, religious practices neither help nor harm. What is intrinsically apparent arises in primordial purity and spontaneous presence, so that the locus of freedom has arisen as naturally present. For when one dissolves in the expanse of primordial purity and spontaneous presence, one is free.[36]

It is by no means clear how we are to understand the apparently close similarities between conceptions of the physical disappearance of adepts at death, as found in the Chinese Taoist and Tibetan Great Perfection traditions. At present, an actual historical connection between them can neither be firmly established nor decisively ruled out.[37] Be that as it may, it is clear that in the view of both traditions the alchemical transformation of the person through ascetical practice must ultimately issue in a physical transformation, in which the subtlest nature of the body, its affinity with ether and light, is manifestly disclosed (see plate 3).

APOLOGETICS AND POLEMICS

In the special texts of the Great Perfection,
It is said there are two ways the four visions are perfected:
Sequentially and all at once.
This is also explained in the [seventeen] Tantras and in *The Treasury of the Supreme Vehicle.*
Though it is generally the case that, without perfecting what is lower,
What is higher cannot be attained,
Who would say that it was inwardly impossible
For him to attain those [four visions]?
The point is that, when the agitations of the three gates are exhausted,
There is an abandonment of all the dispositions
Engendering the impure active energies;
But it would be indeed foolish to hold one-sidedly
That one just becomes like a mute.
Because he was an empowered individual
And because he was possessed by aspiration for others' sake,
Why should it not be that speech and so forth emerged
Effortlessly in others' perceptions?
This venerable master throughout his whole life
Let go of mundane activity and strove for the heart of spiritual attainment.
Above all, this one renounced
All outer and inner actions, and with one-pointed intent
At the so-called White Rock in Shang
For more than ten years of his life in all
Survived on the alchemy of water and leaves,
And continuously, day and night,
Contemplated the profound path; so that, by traversing that path,
The ten powers were disclosed.
Thereafter this holy man, according to the needs
Of place, time, and person,
So as to indicate the magnificence of the teaching,
And to generate faith among those of good fortune,
Proclaimed his own nirvāṇa
With the lion's roar of truth,
For he was empowered in whatever he did.
This he proclaimed in all quarters,
Like the Lord of Sages in ages past.
At that time, upon his own bed,
The coarse body became a rainbow mass.

By stages just his hair and his nails remained,
But even that was owing to the need [of ordinary persons for relics].
If there had been no such need,
Even the hair and nails would have disappeared.
So it was that for the fortunate shrines of the faithful,
So that confident faith would be aroused in all,
His bodily remains were refined into rainbow clarity,
Except for just that much.

It is perhaps noteworthy that no evidence has so far come to my attention of traditional Tibetan Buddhist thinkers' expressing doubts regarding the belief that some persons do vanish in light at death. There appears to have been a cultural consensus that such events do sometimes take place. What was subject to dispute, rather, was the assessment of the religious value and meaning of these occurrences. For the apologists of the Bön religion and the Buddhist Nyingmapa order, the attainment of the rainbow body was regarded as confirming the realization of the highest spiritual goal, the attainment of buddhahood. Thus, Dudjom Rinpoche, head of the Nyingmapa order until his death in 1987, summarizes the entire history of reports of the rainbow body as part of a polemical defense of his tradition:

As for how the supreme and common accomplishments were visibly disclosed, without fail, by those who experientially cultivated the tantras of the Ancient Translation School and the esoteric instructions composed by those who dwelt on the great level of the awareness-holders: there were seven successive generations of disciples beginning with Pang Mipham Gönpo, who did so by means of the instructions of Spatial Class of the Great Perfection. There were seven generations in the lineage which passed from Nyang Tingdzin Zangpo to Dangma, and so on, whose physical bodies dissolved in to the rainbow body . . . by means of the path of the esoteric instructions on inner radiance . . .

It is impossible, too, to enumerate all those who passed into the rainbow body by the paths of the profound treasures. . . . Even during this late age, this may still be illustrated. For example, in 1883/4 . . . the lord among accomplished masters, Rikdzin Pema Düdül, vanished in a body of light. Afterwards, when his personal disciple, the treasure-finder Rangrik Dorje, passed away at Mindröling, his remains vanished into light. . . . During that same period, there were thirteen disciples of the great treasure-finder Düjom Lingpa who attained the rainbow body. Furthermore, very close to the present day, there have been many whom I remember, who were manifestly perceived to have dissolved into the rainbow body without leaving even a trace of their bodies behind: Lingtsang Dzapa Trashi Özer of Dokam in 1935/6 . . . , followed by his regent, Lodrö Gyeltsen, in 1937/8 . . . , followed by Derge Yilungpa Sonam Namgyel in 1952/3. . . .

In addition, one cannot number those [recent figures, including two of the authors'

own teachers, whose] physical bodies mostly vanished into light, accompanied by sound, light, earthquakes and various other miracles.[38]

The disappearance into the body of light, therefore, has become an important aspect of Nyingmapa apologetics.

However, others were less sure that this line of argument was valid, even if one accepted that some adepts did pass away in this fashion. Welmang Könchok Gyeltshen (Dbal-mang Dkon-mchog-rgyal-mtshan, 1764–1853), a well-known polemicist of the Gelukpa order, the "official" school of Tibetan Buddhism since the seventeenth century, writes as follows:

Again, it is repeatedly explained that in the so-called *Vajra Bridge*, if one realizes the significance of instantaneousness, one will attain buddhahood in a single lifetime and the bodily mass will pass away without remainder, and that if one experientially cultivates the *Innermost Spirituality*, having purified one's mind, the bodily mass will be freed from corruption, and that if one experientially cultivates the precepts of the Nyingmapa, one will pass away without remainder.

[To these claims we respond:] It is said that during the age when Bön was widespread, the kings of Tibet, relying upon a divine daemon cord, left no corpses. These [tales] appear to resemble the accounts of "decease in the rainbow body," "fading away in the body of light," and the bodily mass's "passing away without remainder." Nevertheless, though some of those in the [early Indian Buddhist] *śrāvaka* orders hold that, when [nirvāṇa] without remainder [is attained] the continuum of matter and consciousness comes to an end, they do not maintain that the former bodily mass vanishes. And some of the proponents of Mind Only, except for [affirming that] when [nirvāṇa] without remainder [is attained] obscuration and the continuum of obscuration come to an end so that the "genuine limit" is disclosed after one is born in a body of mind within a lotus-enclosure in a pure paradise, similarly do not maintain that one fades away like a rainbow. . . . Although the thousand buddhas of the Auspicious Aeon are arhats without remainder, it is explained that besides being embodied they leave relics behind. For the aspiration to attain supreme enlightenment requires action by means of the two form bodies [the buddhas' emanational body and body of rapture] on behalf of beings until sentient beings are exhausted; so how could this be if the body fades away like a rainbow? If you hold the so-called pure rainbow body to be the "pure illusory body" or the "body of subtle vital energy and mind" [as taught in the "new" Tantras accepted by the Gelukpa order to which the author belonged], there would seem to be no special profundity besides what [is found in the teachings of] the new Tantric schools—rest content with that![39]

In short, Welmang maintains that buddhahood requires bodily existence precisely in order to fulfill the Buddha's spiritual purpose, to instruct others and guide them to liberation. It follows from his perspective, therefore, that, what-

ever else may be said concerning the rainbow body, it is no sign of buddhahood. On the contrary, it represents the adept's withdrawal from the commitment of the Mahāyāna path.

Returning now to the hagiography of Pema the Demon Tamer, it is clear that these issues were very much on the author's mind, for following the account of the master's death, given above, we find these apologetical remarks:

> These events are an amazing report, which accords with the manner in which the master of the teaching of the supreme vehicle, Garap Dorje (Dga'-rab-rdo-rje), and many other knowledge holders who achieved perfection instructed fortunate disciples by means of the body of gnosis. As a supplement to what we have already explained, [we add that] having arrived at the culmination of the primordially pure view that cuts through all resistance, the concrete physical body is either naturally purified or reduced to atomic particles, as when Pang Mipham Gönpo and others passed away—but this is a topic that is nectar for the hearts of those who are fortunate. Oh yes!
>
> In brief, this holy man, beginning from the time when formerly he undertook fierce austerities, liberated his intention from all objectifying orientations, surpassed the accounting of virtue and sin, refined compassion boundlessly, intermingled appearance and mind in a single taste, freed himself from care for food and clothing, and maintained his physical frame with just water and a cotton robe. In lamplight and sunlight his body cast no shadow. His feces and urine had neither impurity nor odor. His body was as light as cotton wool. He passed unimpeded through torrents and cliffs. He was endowed with clairvoyance and more. Thus, it may be proved through both scripture and reason that [his attainments] in no way contradicted the measures and marks of the Great Perfection's path of primordial purity that cuts through all resistance and [its path] of the four spontaneous visions.[40]

Events such as those we have been considering have continued to be reported sporadically throughout the past century. Trungpa Rinpoche's record of the passing of Yilungpa Sonam Namgyel in 1952 was given above, and the 1935 death of the renowned Bönpo master Trashi Gyeltsen (Lingtsang Dzapa Trashi Özer in the citation from Düdjom Rinpoche above) is another widely known instance.[41] The most recent example dates to 1998, with the death of Khenpo Achö (Mkhan-po A-chos, 1918–1998) in the same region, now part of western Sichuan, in which Pema the Demon Tamer once lived. In this case, the event was reported even by the mainland Chinese press:

> *A Demised Lama Shrinks*
>
> According to *Garze Daily,* an 80-year-old Abbot Ngaqiong with the Longmo Monastery in Xinlong County passed away on September 13. His remains, laid open in a hall for seven days according to Buddhist rituals, shrank to the size of an ink bottle on the af-

ternoon of the sixth day, to the size of a bean on the eighth day and disappeared on the 10th day. What remain are hair and nails.[42]

The following year saw the publication of a biography of Khenpo Achö, which in its description of his death, and in its apologetical comments, adheres to much the same pattern found in the earlier writings we have surveyed above.[43]

IN SEARCH OF A CONCLUSION

Hey, hey! The fruit of meditation on the path
Is the realization of enlightenment when affliction is exhausted,
But nowadays there are those learned about the path
Whose afflictions of anger and lust ever increase.
With reference to this holy man, throughout his whole life,
Those who tried hard to scrutinize him for just a sign
Of anger or lust never found it!
All knowledgeable persons speak with one voice on this.
So if your reasoning takes as its premise
The austerities he practiced
And his freedom from affliction,
In contrast to those who practice the Dharma at leisure,
Wrapped up in the afflictions of anger and lust,
[You will conclude that] his was the liberated life of a superior man—
The infallibility of causality is certain!
There can be no contradiction
Between the path of attainment and the fruit attained.
For those of faithful confidence,
Logical confutation about this has no place.
Therefore, those with the good fortune to have entered the path
Respectfully sing this melodious praise song:
"Hey! hey! this Vajrayāna
Is a miraculous wonder!"
Its fame, like the sky,
Expands without any limit at all.
If you deny it through fear,
You merely reduce yourself.

We have become accustomed in recent years to speaking of experiences as culturally constructed or, better, as mediated by the constructions of language and culture. Nothing that I have presented here would refute that view. But we should be wary, lest we come to speak of cultural constructions themselves as the rigid repetitions of culturally specific paradigms. What culture constructs

can at best be described as a malleable field in which received tradition and the lived experiences of individuals enter into dialogue and through their dialogue form and reform one another. Thus, to interpret references to particular types of religious experiences, in this case experiences relating to light and saintly death, even within a well-specified tradition, in this case Tibetan esoteric Buddhism, we must remain context sensitive, just as we must when comparing entirely different traditions. We have seen, for example, that even if we hold that the entire phenomenon of the rainbow body to be a Tibetan cultural construction, it was nevertheless one that could be in important respects contested in Tibet itself. Cultural constructions of this degree of complexity can by no means be defined monolithically.

But let us note that to define this phenomenon as a "cultural construction" at all is itself deeply problematic, for in this case that requires some rather strong assumptions on our part about physical possibility. The problem that we confront here, of course, is that, unlike many types of claimed religious experience, such as visions and most mystical experiences, that can be interpreted as events occurring within the subject's consciousness alone, the rainbow body purports to describe a physical event. It belongs to the class of miracles. Who are we to say that it never occurs? Again, let us note that we *are* willing to countenance the idea of persons dissolving into light in our universe of science fiction; why not, then, in Tibet?

Several aspects of the phenomenon can perhaps be explained naturalistically: in the high altitude environment of Tibet, for instance, and particularly in Eastern Tibet, which is more moist than the thoroughly desiccated western parts of the Tibetan plateau, strange light phenomena are very common. Interestingly, most of our reports of the rainbow body emanate from these regions. (In one valley I visited in 1990, I was stunned by what seemed to be a light show every evening, and when I asked a local acquaintance whether or not this sort of thing was common, he responded bemusedly, "Not very. Probably some yogi has gone off in a rainbow somewhere near here!")

Perhaps, too, we should recall it is normal for the human body to shrink somewhat at death owing to desiccation; this is why the hair and beard frequently seem to grow for a period following death. In some cases, this shrinkage apparently can be quite extreme. Of course, I am not saying that this would account for circumstances under which only hair and nails would remain, but I think that it is plausible to suggest that the rainbow body, even if we treat it as a Tibetan cultural construction, is one that may be in some respects supervenient upon physical facts.

A purely physical explanation, however, even if it could be achieved, would

remain inadequate. What surely must complement it is another type of story altogether, a story about the religious, and not the physical, nature of light. That I have attempted to supply in outline throughout this chapter. Here let me emphasize only that, for the Tibetan Buddhist tradition generally, intensive visions and experiences of light are regularly associated with some types of yogic and contemplative practice and may sometimes be induced by contact with persons, places, and objects thought to be imbued with great spiritual power. It is, I think, in the convergence of all of the factors I have been reviewing that Tibetan belief in its own terms becomes plausible. If, in a phrase well known to Western religious tradition, "the spirit was made flesh," the Tibetan religious world with equal seriousness believed that there have been numerous occasions on which the flesh returned to the spirit.

NOTES

1. Chögyam Trungpa, Rinpoche, *Born in Tibet* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1966), pp. 95–96.

2. Some sources, including Dudjom Rinpoche, Jikdrel Yeshe Dorje, *The Nyingma School of Tibetan Buddhism: Its Fundamentals and History,* trans. Gyurme Dorje and Matthew Kapstein (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1991), give 1883 as the year of Nyag-bla Padma-bdud-'dul's death, but the earlier date of 1872 is certainly correct. This is confirmed by the passage given at n. 5 below, as well as by the dating of Mi-pham's text, cited in n. 3, to 1875.

3. 'Jam-mgon 'Ju Mi-pham-rnam-rgyal, *Gzhan stong mkhas lan seng ge'i nga ro* (Ser-lo dgon-pa, Nepal, xylographic edition), fols. 18b3–21a4.

4. Nevertheless, as a matter of interest I do give large parts of Mipham's verse response at the beginning of each section throughout the present chapter.

5. *Nyag bla padma bdud 'dul gyi rnam thar dang mgur 'bum* (Chengdu: Si-khron mi-rigs dpe-skrun-khang, 1998), p. 130.

6. *Abhisamayālaṃkārāloka,* ed. P. L. Vaidya, Buddhist Sanskrit Texts Series, no. 4 (Darbhanga: Mithila Institute, 1960), p. 292. For an example of the interpretation of the sūtra's affirmation that "the nature of mind is clear light," in the context of a Tibetan contemplative tradition, see Dudjom Rinpoche, *The Nyingma School of Tibetan Buddhism,* 1:334.

7. For an introduction to the Buddhist mahāsiddha traditions, with references to earlier research, see my "King Kuñji's Banquet," in *Tantric Religions in Practice,* ed. David White (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), pp. 52–71.

8. *Ro snyoms phyag rgya chen por sgang dril ba rgyal ba rgod tshang pa'i gsung* (Rtsib-ri xylographic edition).

9. The present summary and all citations of the *Garland of Gems* are based upon my

translation of the text given in "King Kuñji's Banquet." The Tibetan text is found in 'Jam mgon Kong sprul Blo gros mtha' yas, *Gdams ṅag mdzod: A Treasury of Instructions and Techniques for Spiritual Realization* (Delhi: N. Lungtok and N. Gyaltsan, 1971), 11:92–143.

10. The transmission lineage of the traditions of the eighty-four *siddhas* is given in 'Jam mgon Kong sprul Blo gros mtha' yas, *Gdams ṅag mdzod*, 12:770.

11. *Bka'-brgyud mgur-mtsho* (Mtshur-phu xylographic edition). See also *Rain of Wisdom*, trans. Nalanda Translation Committee (Boulder, CO: Shambhala, 1980), p. 20.

12. Thus, for example, one of the common clichés of both meditation manuals and accounts of visionary experience is the set phrase *'od-zer-snang-gsum*, the "trio of [intense] lights, rays, and [diffuse] illumination."

13. Khyung-po Rnal-'byor, *Bar-do'i gdams-pa*, in *Encyclopedia Tibetica* (New Delhi: Tibet House, 1972), 93:150–67. On Khyung-po Rnal-'byor and his tradition, see my articles "The Shangs-pa bKa'-brgyud: An Unknown School of Tibetan Buddhism," in *Studies in Honor of Hugh Richardson*, ed. M. Aris and Aung San Suu Kyi (Warminster: Aris and Phillips, 1980), pp. 138–44, "The Illusion of Spiritual Progress," in *Paths to Liberation*, ed. Robert Buswell and Robert Gimello (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1992), pp. 193–224, and "The Journey to the Golden Mountain," in *Tibetan Religions in Practice*, ed. Donald Lopez, Jr. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), pp. 178–87.

14. See my *Tibetan Assimilation of Buddhism: Conversion, Contestation and Memory* (Oxford University Press, 2000), chap. 1, pp. 5–10, for a brief review of these developments. Bryan Cuevas, *The Hidden History of the Tibetan Book of the Dead* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003) provides now a thorough account.

15. Kapstein, "The Illusion of Spiritual Progress," p. 195.

16. To be sure, later Tibetan Buddhist writers do often attribute the body of light to some of the Indian Buddhist masters (as, in a sense, Khyung-po had done with reference to Niguma), but they are nevertheless careful to distinguish this from the more "mundane" achievements of Tantric yoga. Dudjom Rinpoche, *The Nyingma School of Tibetan Buddhism*, 1:489, for instance, remarks: "Though one can make one's body invisible by mundane methods, such as alchemy, seminal retention, and the energies which circulate the lamp-like vital energy . . . the aforementioned masters [of the Buddhist anuyoga lineage] transformed their physical bodies . . . into radiant light by relying on . . . the non-discursive pristine cognition of the path of insight. We must recognize there to be a great difference between these methods."

17. *Bka'-chems ka-khol-ma* (Lanzhou: Kan-su'u mi-rigs dpe-skrun-khang, 1989), pp. 84–85.

18. For some valuable suggestions, see Per Kværne, "Dualism in Tibetan Cosmogonic Myths and the Question of Iranian Influence," in C. I. Beckwith, ed., *Silver on Lapis: Tibetan Literary Culture and History* (Bloomington, IN: Tibet Society, 1987) , pp. 163–74. Earlier research on Manichaean and Nestorian contacts with Tibet is reviewed in my *The Tibetan Assimilation of Buddhism*, p. 31.

19. Bibliothèque Nationale, Pelliot tibétain 996. The manuscript was first studied in

Marcelle Lalou, "Document tibétain sur l'expansion du dhyāna chinois," *Journal Asiatique* 231 (1939): 505–23.

20. Jacques Gernet, "Les suicides par le feu chez les bouddhistes chinois du V^e^ au X^e^ siècle," in *L'Intelligence de la Chine: Le social et le mental* (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), pp. 168–206, and "Moines thaumaturges," in *Le Vase de béryl: Études sur le Japon et la Chine en hommage à Bernard Frank*, ed. Jacqueline Pigeot and Hartmut O. Rotermund (Paris: Philippe Picquier, 1999), pp. 13–25. See also James Benn, "Where Text Meets Flesh: Burning the Body as an Apocryphal Practice in Chinese Buddhism," *History of Religions* 37 (1998): 295–322. Though it goes beyond the concerns of the present chapter, a related theme that is similarly common to both Chinese and Tibetan Buddhist hagiographical traditions is that of the spontaneous combustion of the adept, often on the funeral pyre. See, for instance, the hagiography of Dorje Lingpa (Rdo-rje-gling-pa, 1346–1405), in Dudjom Rinpoche, *The Nyingma School of Tibetan Buddhism*, 1:789–92.

21. Max Kaltenmark, *Le Lie-sien tchouan: Biographies légendaires des Immortels taoïstes de l'antiquité*, (1953; repr., Paris: Institut des Hautes Études Chinoises, 1987), p. 43 (biography of Ning Fong tseu): "il était capable de produire des fumées teintées des cinq couleurs." I thank Christine Mollier (CNRS, Paris) for her suggestions regarding this and other sources on Chinese religions.

22. Samten Gyaltsen Karmay, *The Great Perfection: A Philosophical and Meditative Teaching of Tibetan Buddhism* (Leiden: E. J. Brill. 1988).

23. This text was first studied in Samten Gyaltsen Karmay, "The Rdzogs-chen in Its Earliest Text: A Manuscript from Tun-huang," in *Sounding in Tibetan Civilization*, ed. Barbara Nimri Aziz and Matthew Kapstein (New Delhi: Manohar, 1985), pp. 272–82. The translation given here, however, is my own.

24. In the later Great Perfection tradition Vairocana and Samantabhadra are often treated as two distinct buddhas. But in this early work, given especially the force of the fourth verse line, it seems best not to interpret this as referring to two separate figures. "Samantabhadra" is a common epithet of the Buddha, and in Indian Buddhist Tantric works frequently refers to the guru, divinized as Vajradhara.

25. Dudjom Rinpoche, *The Nyingma School of Tibetan Buddhism*, 1:490–501, provides the traditional narrative.

26. They are discussed in ibid., 1:542–50, from which the quotations in this section, unless otherwise noted, are drawn.

27. Ibid., p. 642.

28. Marcel Granet, *Danses et légendes de la Chine ancienne*, réédition (Paris: PUF, 1959), 1:81–82 (esp. n. 4 on *yin* [= Mathews character no. 7448]); pp. 295: "On le voit: le thème *taoïste* des sages cachés qui se suicident ou s'évanouissent mystérieusement, et qui deviennent Dieux en refusant d'être Rois, se raccorde au thème des ministres qu'on exécute ou qui s'enfuient après un excès de fortune. L'un et l'autre thèmes s'apparentent aux thèmes des Rois fictifs et des Morts divinisantes." (Emphasis original.) See also Isabelle Robinet, "Metamorphosis and Deliverance from the Corpse in Taoism," *History of Religions* 19 (1979): 37–70.

29. Kaltenmark, *Le Lie-sien tchouan*, p. 38.

30. Ibid., pp. 38, 45, 52, 74, 92. Kaltenmark, *Lao tseu et le taoïsme* (Paris: Seuil, 1965), p. 146, offers this summary: " «Monter au ciel en plein jour», telle sera désormais la formule consacrée pour désigner l'apothéose finale du Taoïste qui a réussi la transsubstantiation de sa personne. Certains, il est vrai, s'en vont plus discrètement: il paraissent mourir comme de simples mortels, mais leur mort n'est qu'apparente, car si l'on ouvre le cercueil après un délai, le corps a disparu et est remplacé par le bâton, l'épée ou les sandales du défunt." Cf. also Henri Maspero, *Le Taoïsme et les Religions chinoises* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971), pp. 218–19, 353–54, 482; and Isabelle Robinet, *Méditation taoïste* (Paris: Dervy Livres, 1979), pp. 254–57, "La mutation libératrice, la dissolution bienheureuse."

31. Kaltenmark, *Le Lie-sien tchouan*, p. 51.

32. Ibid., p. 72. The peculiar diet of the adept is significant. See, e.g., Jean Lévi, "L'abstinence des céréales chez les Taoïstes," in *Études chinoises* 1 (1983): 3–47, esp. pp. 20–21: "l'adepte avant de se dépouiller de son enveloppe corporelle et d'accomplir sa transmutation est saisi d'un feu intérieur qui le dévore comme un brasier."

33. Robert Ford Campany, *To Live as Long as Heaven and Earth: A Translation and Study of Ge Hong's Tradition of Divine Transcendentals* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), p. 75. In the quaintly outdated translation of James R. Ware, *Alchemy, Medicine and Religion in the China of A.D. 320: The Nei P'ien of Ko Hung* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1966), p. 47, this reads: "The genii classics say that processors of the highest class raise their bodies into the void and are then designated Heavenly Genii. Those of the second class resort to the famous mountains and are designated Earth Genii. The third class sloughs off the body after death and is designated Corpse-freed Genii."

34. On Lce-btsun Seng-ge-dbang-phyug (eleventh century), one of the important Tibetan patriarchs of the Great Perfection traditions, see Dudjom Rinpoche, *The Nyingma School of Tibetan Buddhism*, 1:557–59.

35. Dudjom Rinpoche, *The Nyingma School of Tibetan Buddhism*, 1:337–45, summarizes this topic. All-Surpassing Realization (*thod-rgal*) represents the highest division of the Great Perfection teaching.

36. Klong-chen Rab-'byams-pa Dri-med-'od-zer, *Theg-pa'i mchog rin-po-che'i mdzod* (Gangtok: Dodrup Chen Rinpoche, n.d.), vol. Waṃ, plates 444–46.

37. Evidence for early knowledge of Taoism in Tibet is rather thin, but nevertheless clear. The *Sba-bzhed*, an eleventh-century (?) history of the eighth-century adoption of Buddhism as the Tibetan state religion, for instance, mentions the transmission of the teachings of *Le'u-tshe*, i.e., Laozi (*Sba-bzhed ces-bya-ba-las Sba Gsal-gnang-gi bzhed-pa bzhugs* [Beijing: Mi-rigs dpe-skrun-khang, 1980], p. 14). It is uncertain whether this refers to the *Daodejing* or to later traditions of Laozi, e.g., the notorious *Huahujing*.

38. Dudjom Rinpoche, *The Nyingma School of Tibetan Buddhism*, 1:918–19. As noted earlier, the date given here for the death of Padma-bdud-'dul should be corrected to 1872.

39. Dbal-mang, in Se-ra rje-btsun Chos-kyi-rgyal-mtshan et al., *Dgag lan phyogs bsgrigs* (Chengdu: Si khron mi rigs dpe skrun khang, 1997), pp. 699–700.

40. *Nyag bla padma bdud 'dul gyi rnam thar dang mgur 'bum*, pp. 132–33.

41. "Among *Bon-pos* . . . there was *bKra-shis rGyal-mtshan* of *Khams*, who produced fifteen volumes of works, including a history of *Bon*. He lived the life of a hermit, and when he died some forty years ago, he is supposed to have disappeared leaving no mortal remains behind. Such lamas are known as 'rainbow bodies' (*'ja'-lus-pa*). Only the *Bon-pos* and the older orders make such claims, for the *dGe-lugs-pas* are more prosaic in their religious practice" (David Snellgrove and Hugh Richardson, *A Cultural History of Tibet* [New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1968], p. 246). In the Tibetan biography of this figure—Bskal-bzang bstan-pa'i rgyal-mtshan, *Shar rdza ba bkra shis rgyal mtshan gyi rnam thar* (Chengdu: Si khron mi rigs dpe skrun khang, 1988)—the master's final dissolution is recounted on pages 99–101. A more detailed account is given in Dbra-ston Bskal-bzang bstan-pa'i rgyal-mtshan, *Shar rdza ba bkra shis rgyal mtshan gyi rnam thar* (Beijing: Krung go'i bod kyi shes rig dpe skrun khang, 1992), pp. 416–28.

42. From the magazine *China's Tibet*, vol. 10, no. 3. I would like to thank Daniel Winkler for first sending a copy of this article to me.

43. I am grateful to Dan Martin for sharing with me a copy of this work, by the well-known (in Sichuan) Rnying-ma-pa lama Mtsho-po Rdor-blo. Unfortunately, Dr. Martin's example is missing both title page and publication information. It seems to have been printed in Chengdu in 1999 and, like several of the author's earlier publications, was distributed privately.



PLATE 1. The bodhisattva Maitreya, who will be the next Buddha, enthroned in the Tuṣita heaven. The motif of the rainbow-colored, undulating light rays, surrounded by the solar aureole, is suggestive of much earlier Buddhist painting from a variety of sites along the Central Asian Silk Road. Northeastern Tibet, sixteenth or seventeenth century. (Courtesy of the Shelley and Donald Rubin Foundation.)





PLATE 2. Padmasambhava as a mahāsiddha, the primordial buddha Vajradhara in the sky above, with rays of rainbow light linking the two registers. Far eastern Tibet (Khams), eighteenth century. Note the use of color washes, a technique influenced by Chinese painting, to accentuate the quality of luminosity. (Courtesy of the Shelley and Donald Rubin Foundation.)

PLATE 3. Guru Padmasambhava radiating rainbow light. The artist's conception here powerfully evokes the image of the "rainbow body." Nineteenth century.